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## Rider

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## TAYLOR BROWN

### *Rider*

Winner, 2009 Montana Prize in Fiction

Iron-shod hooves stove the old wagon road, rock-jeweled, like gunshots. That sound lying in ambush in her chest for so long arrived now out of a quadrant near alien to the meat where she stored him. Her heart.

She slunk out of bed with the quilt left behind and then the gown shed too so that when he knocked and entered soundless with the night all over him in a cold aura she was warm where she touched him. She did her best to brush the night from his vestments, his skin, and flush the blood into the white of him, his coldest places, and the red fluid came like the blush of something killed in all that snow out of which he rode.

Blooded she knew him. Not him but what he was. A man. Another.

I know you, she whispered to him. A rider. But he did not hear her.

He was a being borne of night alone and by the very first delineation of black timber to timber he rose furtive from the slumber and stood stark white in the little cabin, a thing untouched by light but luminous itself. Always she was watching the black pines beyond the window and wanting to slow the turning of night to day. But the wanting seemed only to quicken the first stalks of light where they grew upward between the slatted black trunks of pine.

In his emptied bedspace only the shotgun, old double Damascus that divided them, too cold to warm. This instrument of spurious fidelity that let them take rest in the wake of their coupling. This hated thing, she twined her heated limbs around the black steel and stock and the empty chambers moaned when she blew across the barrels.

The geese were snow geese, white as the driven when he shot them from the sky. He did so in dead of night. Ambush. His was

a poacher's blind hidden from man and bird both. Not his wife though. She knew what scarce meat he preyed upon in fields not his own, and forbidden. Or thought she did.

His horse was a fine one, black and masculine. A cut above his station. Into the outlands he rode it, the terrain black and silver, mud and pond. There he spotted the earth with the night's kill, birds fresh fallen and white where punctures red-welled into feather and barb. On the return, he stopped at the lone cabin yellowlit like a single soul in all those wilds. This his long custom.

A December night he quilted the horse against the cold, flesh-cutting as it was, and lay down in the bed not his own. Hers. In the morning the horse was dead standing stiff-legged and frozen and the geese, unsacked, were conjoined in severe attitudes of flight and death, moiled, a single frozen ménage of rendering so morbid and perverse it might sicken the hardest of heart, yet sculpted of brute and natural force.

Would you look at that? she said. I've a mind to pray over them.

Wouldn't none of it happened you'd of let me stow them in the house, he said.

The first night together she'd told him she'd not have his kill inside.

That was a long time ago I said that, she said.

He spat. Still holds, though. Don't it.

It was not a question.

She watched him drag his ice-laden kill down the road, the frozen jumble of wing and beak and claw straining the sack at mean angles, unforgiving shapes, and scrawling black vents of earth in the snowed-over road. Later the first shoots of daylight punctured the dawn-dark trees and struck the rigored horse on the big flanks, the serrated mane, the ice-glazed eyes of black marble devoid of all life. She tracked the dead thing's thaw by its lips, black ones agape in death, pinching them between thumb and forefinger at intervals.

In minutes they'd gone gummy again, like storebought licorice. Soon thereafter the first leg gave way, buckling, and the others, still rigid, crackled like trees overwrought with storm-ice. She leapt from



harm as the black horse hove toward the buckling leg, a front one, and crashed headlong into the snow aside her cabin, laying there bloodless and alien as something hewn from black rock. Too heavy to move; she shoveled snow to hide it from passers on the road, should there be any.

He trudged onward through the snow, cursing the woman, the horse, the sudden freeze, the very sky that fed him. The food upon his back, the food tugged willy-nilly through the snow. He cursed them all. Rivulets of melted snow slid over the rim of his boot shafts, sliding down to pool in his soles, cold beyond all imagining. All was white but for the black stalks shot upright out of the snow in their groves, their huddled stands, the naked reaches of them groping skyward. The ashen sky. Geese hooted southward in their droves. He cursed them.

The road wound rightward ahead. Then the covered bridge he crossed always at night, the divider of this outland, private-owned, from those safe for a man of his burden. Here he existed in sin. Hunting, riding, trudging, coupling. All trespass. All sin. There, the far side of the river, lay absolution. The law of man required proof, after all. Who was to say which side of the river the geese were flying when he killed them?

The bridge was very pretty with the new snow so heavy on its roof. Through the slatted wood beneath his boots he saw the black hiss of the river white-whorled with snowmelt. His bounty of fowl slid easily on the hardwood, unimpeded by root or ice. The bodies had begun to thaw, go deferential to his aims, fewer edges to snag. He cursed them still for their weight.

The shadowed tunnel, at least, gave comfort to a man of his nocturnal workings. Never ever had he dared to cross in daylight. Rich men paid astronomical sums to hunt the richness of the land he poached, and men richer still paid to protect the wealth of blood and fur and feather that abounded there. What he lacked in fortune he made up in daring, cunning, quick aim. He would return home, he thought, and distribute the snow geese among his kin like Old Saint Nick of fable. Christmas Eve, after all.

A good distance on the other side of the river he heard the staccato racket of horses on the bridge behind him. Hoof shots

rang out of the covered maw like sudden ambush. He did not curse. No. He showed the whites of his teeth a moment to himself and hid them. Then he turned to see, as any man would. They rode three abreast, dark silhouettes under the bridge. The sun, stowed away beyond a pallid veil of cold, threw light enough to illumine them white-faced and black-coated when they rode from under the raftered dark. He glanced only a moment and turned away. As any man would.

The chestnut machines they rode slowed to a trot around him, the hot-breathed exhaust of their lungs audible to a man staring only at the road ahead. One, the leader, rode ahead and turned his big horse broadside the walker.

Ho, said the warden. What have you in the bag, sir?

He stopped but did not open the bag.

And a Merry Christmas to you gentlemen, he said.

The one in front of him tugged his jacket to reveal the white half moon of a revolver handle, ivory-gripped, protruding butt-first from his belt holster.

What have you in the bag, sir?

Christmas gifts.

Of what species?

Goose.

Dump them out.

Now this is public land. Your jurisdiction ends at the river—

The warden drew the pistol from his belt and cocked the hammer and aimed the bottomless well of the barrel black-calibered at the man's chest.

Dump them out.

As told, he turned to dump the contents of the sack. There on the road behind him lay tell-tale rivulets of thaw blood, red on the white road, maddeningly red, a bright ribbon tethering him to the wrong side of the river as surely as a noose of rope or chain.

Sin has a way of leaking out, said the warden.

He looked up at the men so tall on their horses. His shotgun was broken-barrel over his shoulder, unloaded. No other means of

quick escape at hand. He dumped out his booty, birds of tundra red-painted in their own death. The fluid once binding them poured out alongside, a pink-watered blush in the snow. There was nothing more sculpted here, bodies gone slack.

Please don't put me away, he told them. I'll do anything.

The leader decocked his pistol and holstered it.

Anything? he said.

When she lay down that night she could not take her rest. The wild geese clutched so meanly in death, like birds huddled close against the cold. A wing here or there wavered slowly out of this image of them, feathers ice-serrated into a blade, and the honks of their kind choked from their beaks in strange bergs of goose speak. She wished she could warm them over the flames, restore tenderness and even flight, for the old tales told of beings long preserved in blocks of ice. Prehistoric things resurrected from centuries of cold fixation, minds frozen on one solid thought.

The geese were her friends. Always had been. But she could never touch them, altitude too high. Now she slept with one of their hunters. Nay, a poacher. She loved him. Wished to mend him from the bloodless chill within him and without. Make him supple and pinkened. No stranger to the sunlight of her backdoor. No stranger to the sun at all. Like her. A worshipper of sun and animal, of animate earth. Upon her roof stood a rough-hammered weathervane of a mythic bird, a phoenix, invisible at night.

She rose from bed and slid her feet into the boots of her husband, a decade dead, and cloaked herself in every article of clothing at hand. The night was milder, no harsh freeze, though all marks of travel along the road had been covered in a luminous down of snowfall. She crossed the covered bridge she'd crossed rarely since her husband, a warden, had been blown headless by a short ten gauge at the mouth of this bridge. When she saw the peppered divots along the jambs and siding she halted and touched them. Bits of him might yet be buried in the minute scoriations of pine.



The road crested a white hill bristling with naked pine and then dropped into a valley. There in the white bowl of snowy hills lay the town. His town. The hilltops shone white under the moon and blued downward into a navy bottom against which the lights of town glimmered like a hand-scattering of gold bits. She started down, a slight woman mummified in thick tatterings of cloth.

She found his house easily. She asked some carolers. Said she had a gift to deliver from the outlands. As she walked in the direction pointed, the carols came angel-voiced over the rough-shod porches and snow, through the midnight-colored well of stars above them. Caroling faces black-gaped with song.

From the moon-shadowed lee of a neighboring house she watched him through the square yellowlit glass of a back room. Crockery sat all around him. One by one, he removed the reddened geese from his sack and set them upon a cutting board. He cut off the wings and head and one foot, leaving the other as a handle. Then he plucked the feathers from the flanks, the back, the tail. In a pot over the fire he melted paraffin in boiling water, let cool, and dipped each goose into the viscous liquid. The remaining feathers dried laminate with wax and she watched him peel off that and the feathers, the down like peeling an orange. He cut a wide cavity from the rear vent and dug away the innards, saving hearts and livers in certain pots, various cuts of meat in others.

She watched him work long into the night, bent over his work. Goose breasts the size of a human heart smeared his hands red, the boon of Christmas morning. He handled the birds with great care, nothing vicious even in the plucking. The birds he flayed open were slack-winged and jolly-necked, the meat red, those soft engines of flight coming free in shapes their own. His face reflected all of this, a colored complexion she'd not seen, whether of his own blood or that he worked she could not say.

She reached home by first light, carried there by the thought of warmth in times past, warmth to come, warmth by virtue of more than fire alone.

At the door she looked where the big horse lay buried underneath the snow. Some might bury the thing but she knew the hollow pangs of winter and how many bellies on how many nights such a lot of meat could fill. She would leave it there in case. Not tell anyone. Not even him.

That day, in daylight, he came to her. Gift-bearing, she presumed, and welcomed him at the door. He was on another horse, a chestnut horse, and his face ghost-white against the black of his scarf and hat.

Let me warm you, she said, drawing him inside.

Listen, he said. Where is my horse?

Why?

Where is my horse?

Buried, she said.

I need something to kill.

What?

I need something to kill, he said. I need the blood.

She grabbed his arm. Listen to me, she said. Are you crazy?

They think you are, he said. That you're a witch. Scaring off the game. That's what they think. The wardens, the members. You're the one taking the game. You.

You must leave, he said. For good. Forever. I'll spread the blood in here and tell them I sank you in the river.

I have rights to this land, she said. By virtue of my husband.

He looked up the road and down. No one. He would have to. He went back out to the horse and took the puppy from the sack, newborn, pink slits for eyes. When he went back inside she had the shotgun from the bed leveled on him.

In the river, she said. That's where they found him. What was left at least.

Who?



My husband.

I don't know nothing about it, he said. They said to sink you—

I should of known, she said. Goddamn you I should of known.

She primed both hammers with a heavy click and threaded her finger across the triggers, both of them.

His twelve gauge, as always, lay broken over his shoulder. Since the incident at the bridge he'd taken to keeping both barrels loaded. A precaution. And he knew what way to open her heart. All at once he tossed the puppy at her and let the shotgun slide off his shoulder into the crook of his arm. She extended an arm sideways to catch the splay-footed animal and opened her white breast to him and he jerked both barrels home with a heavy click, aiming for the heart.

The white wedge of the blast slammed into her chest, sledge-heavy, and tiny jets of matter, white-hot, sang quivering into the meat of her, her heart, her lungs, spreading like a white flock hatched in the blood. She wanted so badly to follow them south. Toward warmer skies, sunlight. The shotgun clattered to the floor. The puppy the bed. She looked a last time into his eyes and knew they were closer now than ever they'd been, than ever they'd be, and she turned from him, his red face, and staggered toward her back door, outward, into the light. The hard palate of earth was cold and black beneath the snow. Cold and black on her knees, her palms, her face. Then she was nothing but another sliver of it, earth-blackened and going cold.

In the spring of that year the snows melted late, later than ever, and riders passing along an outland trail, wardens, found a dark hulk of horse rising black-haunched from the diminishing snow alongside a small cabin. It rose from the snow complete, preserved by the cold, like something resurrected full-bodied from the grave. There were not many horses of such quality in short radius of this discovery; the owner was certain. The mane of the horse rose jagged and black, black as the blood found smeared inside the cabin.